



## **Crisis Communication and Emergency Risk Communication Guide**

The following information is to be used as a **guideline** for communicating during a crisis and is intended for use by someone who is usually not a primary spokesperson (public affairs officer) but is supporting the primary communicator. Each incident will be different and will require flexibility and adjustments as the situation unfolds. The public affairs officer of an installation or an Army agency will have a crisis communication plan, which will be the blueprint for information dissemination and interactions with stakeholders. That plan is the primary plan to follow during a crisis. The information contained here serves as a supplement to the primary crisis communication plan and to give non-primary communicators some idea of the support they may provide during a crisis.

The following information is based on the principles of risk communication and the experiences of staff in CHPPM's Health Risk Communication Program (HRCP). Information is also adapted from work done by Peter Sandman, Vincent Covello, Caron Chess, Regina Lundgren, Keith Fulton, Sandy Martinez, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Primary communicators should be trained in risk communication and/or have public affairs training. Individuals who have not had any training in risk communication should contact HRCP for training opportunities (<http://chppm-www.apgea.army.mil/risk/>). HRCP can also provide communication support during a crisis.

### **Communication Objectives During a Public Health Crisis**

- To instill and maintain public confidence in the DoD leadership's credibility, its healthcare system, and its ability to work in coordination with civilian authorities to respond to and manage a crisis. Public messages from DoD will provide accurate, rapid, and complete information to educate, calm fears, and maintain public order.
- To minimize, as much as possible, public panic and fear related to the crisis.
- To rapidly provide the public, healthcare providers, policymakers, and the media access to accurate, consistent, and comprehensive information about the public health crisis, and the management of the situation.
- To address, as quickly as possible, rumors, inaccuracies, and misperceptions.
- To provide accurate, consistent, and highly accessible information and materials through the coordination of communication efforts with other federal, state, and local partners.



### **Key Information to Remember During the Crisis**

- Liaison and work with the local public affairs officer to augment local capabilities. Follow the local crisis communication plan.
- Share information with other agencies working the issue.
- Do not release any information unless it is cleared by the local PAO, the Incident Commander, and the local Command. Ensure that other agencies are also aware of the information you plan to release. If the incident involves terrorism, the FBI must approve all information to be released to preserve their investigation. For natural disasters, make sure you coordinate with FEMA and state emergency management officials so everyone speaks with one voice.
- Prepare those speaking with the media and other stakeholders so that they are knowledgeable of the situation and instill confidence with the public via the media.

### **The Dynamics of a Public Health Crisis**

The purpose of this section is to describe the dynamics of a public health crisis to increase situational awareness and provide context for communications during a crisis. Any scenario involving a public health crisis will result in:

- Fear and panic among members of the public;
- A frenzied response from local, regional, national, and international media outlets;
- A series of emergency response actions from agencies at the local, regional, national, and international levels; and
- Dreaded consequences, including death, overloaded health care systems, and potential civil disorder resulting from media reports, panic, and possible quarantine actions for serious, contagious diseases.

Because of the nature of a crisis, the scene at the MTF or installation may be chaotic. Many organizations and agencies will move rapidly into the area to accomplish their respective missions. Cooperation among these organizations and agencies is expected and necessary. It is important to understand the respective missions of the many organizations and jurisdictions involved.

It is anticipated that a crisis will involve many of the characteristics listed below:

- General confusion caused by sketchy information and lack of details, especially during the initial days of the crisis.
- Citizens will demand information about precautions and immediate steps they can take to protect themselves and their families. In natural disasters, people will demand and expect



basic life necessities be provided: food, water, shelter. The public outrage factor will be high.

- Policy decisions may change on a daily basis. These changes will affect communication effectiveness.
- There will be high demand for action to combat the crisis.
- An abundance of caution will be exhibited by national experts during the initial phase of the crisis—they'll want to make the right calls and will desire concrete information before doing so. Public frustration may be apparent as information appears slow in development.
- The collective focus of all responding organizations and agencies will be public health, safety, and the prevention of further spread of disease. In terrorism incidents, the FBI will also be concerned about the criminal investigation. In spite of these shared interests, there will be competing agendas and varying opinions about "how" to perform these missions.
- The media will air widely varying viewpoints from public health professionals, political entities, and other organizations.

The keys to effectiveness in the situation described above include the following:

- Focus efforts on public safety and prevention.
- Coordinate actions among agencies and organizations responding to the crisis.
- Share information—internally and externally. Give factual information. Do not over-reassure. Tell people this is a serious situation and what to expect. Be confident in telling the public what you do know, but acknowledge uncertainty. "What we know is .... I wish I could give you more information but there are many things we don't know yet. We'll give regular updates as we learn more."
- Express empathy for the victims and their families, and acknowledge people's fears.
- Accommodate the information needs of the media and the general public.
- Maintain flexibility. The situation will constantly change and you will need to adapt to new information and shift gears. The plan you developed one hour ago may no longer be valid.
- Maintain a high state of situational awareness.
- Do no further harm.